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UNCLAS GEORGETOWN 000257

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: Radio, monopoly and technology in Guyana

1. Summary: The Stabroek News, the leading independent daily newspaper in Guyana, carried an editorial on Friday, March 17, analyzing GoG ambivalence with regard to radio broadcasting in Guyana. The editorial is reproduced below:

Begin Text:

One cannot avoid the conclusion that after thirteen years in government the PPP/C has absolutely no intention of releasing its stranglehold on radio, and allowing private broadcasters to operate. We are now going into the third election since it came into office, and given its track record of using the state media for politically partisan purposes, there can be no optimism that things are about to change this year, of all years.

Already almost three years have passed since it issued its draft broadcasting bill, which ran into a storm of criticism not least because some of its provisions were out of consonance with the recommendations of the Report of the Joint Committee on Radio Monopoly, Non-Partisan Boards and Broadcasting Legislation. This committee had comprised members of both the government and the main opposition, and had submitted its final report in December 2001. Among other things, this document had proposed guidelines for the setting up of an autonomous National Broadcasting Authority.

When the proposed broadcasting bill first appeared, the government said it was placing it in the public arena for debate, and indeed, debate there was, including some insightful commentary from media specialists such as Messrs Kit Nascimento and Hugh Chomondeley. However, though there were further discussions between the parties there was no positive outcome.

Subsequently, of course, Leader of the Opposition Robert Corbin withdrew from the 'constructive engagement' with President Jagdeo, and so the entire question was left in limbo. Unfortunately for the government this is still no excuse; if it was really serious about legislation to govern broadcasting which would meet the larger requirements of all sides, it would certainly have found a way to move forward. As it is a few weeks ago Mr Corbin said the PNC/R might entertain the possibility of starting a pirate radio station; if the party does go this route, it would be nothing more than the administration deserves for all its foot-dragging on the issue. It might be noted as an aside that the BBC radio monopoly in the UK was broken in 1964 by the pirate station Radio Caroline, which broadcast from a converted ferry moored outside British territorial waters.

As was remarked by more than one commentator in 2003, the administration is labouring over an old-fashioned broadcasting bill, while the rest of the world is looking at telecommunications legislation. Even as things stand locally, technology overtook the situation a long time ago. The government is clearly concerned about control of radio, but there are no controls on the internet and it is unlikely it would be able to introduce any.

Nowadays with the appropriate software, audio content can be sent to a digital device - something called podcasts. Theoretically, therefore, the PNC/R would not even need to bother about a radio station, it could just podcast its propaganda. Admittedly, that would limit it to internet users, but the number of those is likely to continue to increase, no matter what the administration does or does not do.

Many BBC radio programmes are available in podcast form, while some of the print media too are dabbling in podcasting, including the Guardian Unlimited and the Daily Telegraph. The latter, it is reported, has something close to a daily news bulletin, and also has some of its columnists reading their pieces. While that might not sound very inspiring, no doubt their efforts will become more sophisticated as time goes by.

It is possible, therefore, that somewhere down the line newspapers (not to mention others) will maintain the equivalent of radio stations - albeit only for internet purposes - and perhaps progress eventually to video-podcasts. Given the integration of communications technology, some people will be listening to podcasts on mobile phones.

The irony of the situation is that President Jagdeo has publicly committed himself to trying to give every child access to the internet. While that might be laudable, one wonders if he has fully thought out the implications of this dream project. The truth of the matter is there is no controlling information any longer; the worldwide web and attendant developments have put

paid to that. By the time the government gets around, therefore, to looking at broadcasting legislation encompassing radio licences (among other things), no one will be listening to radios any more.

End Text.

BULLEN